

A MYTH WITH NO MOUTH

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities

Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

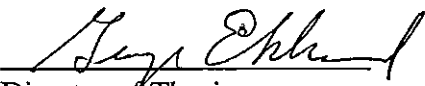
Master of Arts

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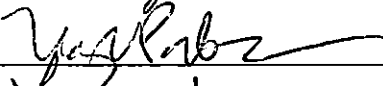
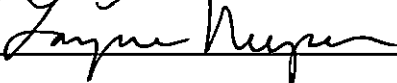
Jared Salyers

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Director of Thesis

Master's Committee:

, Chair



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A MYTH WITH NO MOUTH

Jared Salyers, M.A.
Morehead State University, 2003

Director of Thesis: 

The past is an ever-present entity that shapes our perceptions, belief systems, and social constructs, which then in turn constantly inform the present. More accurately, the past becomes a personal mythology, a complete unwritten history whose symbols and signifiers impose meaning and order on the present. These unwritten mythologies shape the world, and yet remain unspoken; for the most part, they are not ever voiced at all. Yet true interaction, however primal, seems to take place only when these mythologies are interpreted and understood. The realization that each individual contains a private myth which structures a world view, and the following action of attempting to interpret that particular myth, is the beginning of communication.

The thesis presented concerns itself with the way these unwritten personal myths are formed, and finally how true growth happens when we move outside of our myths only to acknowledge others. We are always in various stages of interpretation and revelation. The thesis thematically concerns itself with the geographical, physical and metaphysical ways in which these myths are constructed by an individual. The first section of the thesis, "World Without the Lips", concerns itself with just this process of mythological structuring. While geographical and dominant social and religious mindsets ultimately impact the structuring of myth dramatically, the past and legends of the place, the personal past that one perceives a particular place as having, also share a significant role in the creation of the myth.

The second section of the thesis, "Into the South", concerns itself with a movement from the personal to the social, from the cold places of memory to hot places of civilization and interaction. This is where the myths of others must be internalized and interpreted, however unconventional the communication might be. Whether in sketches or prayer, the myth here is spoken somehow, and the worlds and creations of others are opened, demanding a different structuring and analysis of the world.

"A Myth With No Mouth" is ultimately a collection that attempts to understand the way that personal history attains relevance and importance, and how ultimately that myth is communicated and how people and their own myths are understood.

Accepted by: Boyd Shlender, Chair

Vaughn

Layne Neuse

A MYTH WITH NO MOUTH

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I. WORLD WITHOUT THE LIPS

“This is not a story to pass on.”

**- Toni Morrison,
Beloved**

COMPARING CROW

Crow creeps along bone
The length of walnut limb
A soft thundercloud down reflecting
And refracting the blood of sunset
It's September
I'm alone and watching.
Comparing crow's
Soft rain-kissed underbelly
To my hands, hard and thick
Like a lizard's back;
My heart is like my hands.
I envy crow
Whose feathers ruffle in wind
Pregnant with water.
Even when the wind is irate,
Comes to pluck black feathers,
Crow still laughs, flies.
Crow does
And walnut twigs vibrate
Like rubber bands at his passing.
It's September
A sliver of moon slides out
On a long walk home.

DANDELION

Your body brings them up.
Unseen head and yellow teeth against grave stone,
They come up crooked and stretching,
Yawning prophecy from a last acid vision.
Gnarled milk-filled bodies root through teeth,
Twisting around a crucifix in the hand,
Now limp against the bones.
They twist together,
Mimicking movement of your old cigarette smoke,
And the thrusting of the bodies
Back in time and high school.
They push up through the dirt and the years,
They push up green-leafed to gain
Yellow silken memory for their hair.
They push up to flower into insect palaces,
Clinging to a lingering sweetness,
A sugar to tickle the fine-tuned hair of the wasp's leg.
They are your solitary flowers, and the wild is their only bringer.
I wander by grave stone where all the weeping mourners went.
I pull up one flower and feel the root wrapped around your finger,
Pulling your hand up slightly,
And I imagine you're waving hello.

HOME SEEN THROUGH A THUNDER STORM

The flag flaps in a drum-drenched wind.
Tonight, the stripes do not matter.
The stars are born in another country.
Down in Kentucky, fighting off rain,
I look down to find which land.
Here, staked to this ground,
Who knows where we come from?
Our blood is a fight with fathers
We never really knew.
Everything here has been hunted
By the tribes from the south.
None of them stayed long
Because of Gods that walked
The woods in the evening.
Likely, we were birthed by ghosts.
Maybe the ground grew tired
And threw its prison arms up and around
And gave glimpses of highway only as hope.
When the sky cracks its white whip
Roads can be seen circling
And breaking their own arms
To turn around to the way they came.

CHAIN AND HORSE HAUNTINGS

The rusty chain that swung me
 Hangs on a nail
 Drove in knuckled wood
 In the shed
 In the forest
 We used to swing
 Beside the plastic pony
 That hung from the frame
 Its paint arthritic
 Ancient
 We used to sleep
 Beside the trees
 That were calendars, sundials
 For season and time
 Always told us
 Through shadow and shade
 When dark was coming
 When the chain snapped
 The sun sank down
 The plastic pony
 Began its haunting
 Its faded eye
 Looked up from its grave
 Her body is buried
 In that same forest
 That hugs the shed
 The tomb of the chain
 I hear behind the house
 Thumping horse's hooves
 Sounding like November snow
 And the wind blows
 Rattling the chain
 Leaving rust stains on wood
 The spirit of the swing set
 Screams down the ridge
 Wrapped in white shroud
 With faded equine eye
 I remember

How we looked in the swing
With our hair kissing dirt
Worn-out ground
And naked feet
Massaged by sky
A streaking apricot blur
In the swing
A broken thing now
A ghost at my window
And in the intestines
Of November
The first snowflake falls
Away from the white
Of the moon
Down into view

CLEANING AN OPEN DUMPSITE IN A KENTUCKY FOREST

Rash color of snow blends
In (intercourse) with the soil and the shuddering
Pond over a barbed wire fence
Broken bottles
Lie in the thick of sick earth belly
With oil cans
Twisted fans
Forgotten dolls
Grandfather's ignorance
Gently finger fevered ground
To soothe and clean
This sickness
Dinner plate fragment
Slices throat
Of young tree deep
Down to root
To jugular
Pick up careful Carnation milk cans
And old muddy jelly jars
Now inhabited
The home of the spider
Sink to stained knee
In amnesia pit
Try to forget ground
Can remember
Sink to stained knee
Make a prayer
An apology
Try to wash
Grandfather's hands

SITTING BULL MEDITATES ON HIS PERFORMANCES
IN BUFFALO BILL'S WILD WEST SHOW, CIRCA 1885

Here is the dust ghosts die on.
They are only rolling credits in the movie
Taped in front of the world.
Sky was left for nothing,
Only to die and bleed on painted ponies.

Here, the film extends its arms
Into black and white Saturday Mornings.
The cracked smiles of carnival children
Begging for visions are louder than the gun.
To them, the death of apparitions is not sin.

Here, there is a plastic laughter.
Not like the gut thunder
Soaked with moon I used to know.
These shrieks are prayers to the smokestack,
These shrieks are oblivious prayers to the bullet.

Here, the phantoms canter and star in the film,
And are given countless deaths in the material.
And the smokestacks still belch iron rebellion,
And the thunder is rolling away in torn curtains,
And no one can stop bleeding.

Here is the great grey land the sun did not show me.
The movie is one that eats its own tail.
This dust will always own the dying.
I can only thank it for leaving
No mark of my walk where I passed through.

DRIVING PAST UPPER TYGART IN THE DARK ON THE EDGE OF AUTUMN

For Amy Jesse and the rest of the lost

The cold truth is we move North.
On the highway, the guts and ice are needles
And the broken dogs make strange compasses.
A straight line flowers from the belly,
Points forward in one thousand directions.

You can follow blood-soaked canine fire ropes that run
Beside the hard yellow double lines.
Connections that linked dogs to the breath
Of one another. In this separation, knowledge
Is born. Where the headlights refuse to go.

The playground you pass has lit out like everything else.
Black fingers raised to moon and missing the children.
All the ghosts have gone from here, over
The chain links to follow the red winding road.
Toward the cold spine of the country.

This is the endless procession.
You go searching for the wise and the dead.
All the ghosts have gone to roll marijuana;
They have gone to birth babies in the cold grey
of Ohio. I follow their footprints forward.

MAN PONDERES ON THE DIVINE WHILE
WORKING THE GROUND

Sundays, I have seen fainting ladies
Grip fans on Popsicle sticks.
On all of them, a painting
Of a face that is not your face.
How they love to finger whatever.
You are much more than wasps
Taking flight in the tops
Of all the white houses we built.
All day, my eyes are able to catch
All the ways of the mules' backs.
If I stretch all my fingers forward,
I am no closer to a soaking wet beard.
There is no face if the sky cannot hold it.
Just the fact that the field gets plowed.
The fact when squirrels are shot, some
Hungry mother's prayer is answered.

INDIAN BURIAL MOUND I

The history of the unwritten is here.
Here are the songs no one knows.
Beneath my feet, you have been
Singing since I knew the sun.
You are stretched out to the East,
And have lain inside the land
That has birthed the both of us.
In one circle, the cradle and rattle,
In the same, the grave and a gate.
This is all one circle.
From where we are,
The stars have circumscribed sky.
How strange to have you for a brother.
Everything you can remember
Rests in the great bellies of snakes
Hibernating under all the highways.
Curves on curves, Written on unwritten.
This is all one circle.

AMANDA

Amanda Dawn, it's begun now.
Upstairs, you're holding new eyes,
New fingers in your arms.
Down here in the basement level,
My hands hold thousands of pictures.
I experience new births
By grieving the old ones.
Here's one, edges curled:
A blurry girl walks
Through yard piled thick with snow.
Behind, a big black house
On a big black hill,
Coal-carved in familiar posture.
Back before all those malls got you.
Before you turned on the blurry girl
And bit down hard to the bone.
I'm down here, and don't expect
You to understand.
A picture in the hand is never
Worth the one in the head.
I can see the brilliant story of your wound.
A trail and a path, a beaded
Walk of scars and imperfections.
That face has now passed,
And has taken with it the bite
Of the town and the city.
I walk back upstairs
With just this one in my hands.
There you are, locked to the couch,
Holding the bundle of hungry hands
Wrapped in the old pink blanket.
Mothers and aunts and cousins
Circle you and laugh
And snap thousands of pictures.

SAINTS GO MARCHING

Hot August haze. 2:30 am. Dead and down time.
Looking out, I've wanted nothing more
Than to see the ghosts of the lost
Descend and march on Second street,
All hands out, all eyes empty.
But. Nothing.
Only rolling paper coffee cup in wind
And yowl of lonely heated bitch-cat.
Only nothing. Only chalk board sky.
There can be no more parades here.
How easy to be lost in drums that never sound,
In movies that only the mind can make.
Second street is suddenly way too ancient.
The street is an avenue of the dead.
If you keep watching, everyone will march.
Not a single apparition will stop walking.
There is only one real way -
To go to sleep and live.

II. INTO THE SOUTH

**“Quièn escribe tu nombre con letras de
Humo entre las estrellas del sur?
Ah, dèjame recordarte còmo eras entonces,
Cuando àùn no existías.”**

**- Pablo Neruda,
“Juegas Todos los Dias”**

UNFREEZING A DRAINAGE PIPE ON A WINTER MORNING
SO THAT I MIGHT BATHE

I walk unshowered into winter.
It is amazing how quick new snow
Brings ancient curses to the tongue.
Down the hill, the steeple
Atop church juts a frozen cross
Into the air. The white
Of both the sign and sky
Make each other invisible
Entities that can only burn.
I go to bring forth water
And cast down my collective pail.
I go bearing a strange torch.
I go to see what stirs in the ditch.
I go with frozen breath and propane tank.
With caveman fire and angry sound
To the frozen alphabet of the stream.
It is here that my work must work.
I put fire's fist into an ice face.
I cannot turn from the thawed blood.
The water is running now,
Surrounded by the snow
On both sides of the bank.
The water is now aware
Of the frightening possibility
Looking upon the frozen bodies
Of the countless snowflakes.
And now the fire has unbricked pipe
So the water runs through sinks
And washers and veins I cannot see.
Things will not well up in the face
Of my mother and father
And I can shower
With a clean conscience.

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, MY FATHER WALKED THROUGH
A PLOWED KENTUCKY FIELD

My father's fingers
Found the arrowhead
On the day of my birth.
My first breath
Came as the ancient prayer
Saw light and drew air
For the first time
In a century.
My sign
Knew the inside of the body
Its blood-wetted tip
Covered so long
By the blankets of home.
The last sound it heard
Was dying beast's breath.
The first thing I knew
Was its ghost
Unearthed by the body
That unearthed me.

STRANGE PLACES MAKE ME A CAVEMAN

One night in Mexico is in the process
Of coming on full blown.
It is hard to talk with this child.
Our eyes and tongues
Are not the same as the other.
It requires that both of us
Come out of our dark stories.
I can only offer the primal.
I draw a picture on a napkin,
A comic book hieroglyphic,
To ease the abrupt steps we take.
On the napkin, on walls and caves,
There is the electric of connection.
We burn history at both its ends.
I see in the dark lakes of his eyes
A tendency not found in cold lives.
He is the path that must be walked in.
When all else loses its light,
Put some fingers to the red
And make a nature visible.

I WENT TO THE LIBRARY'S TOP FLOOR AND DUSTED OFF
THE THESIS OF AN OLD FRIEND

It has occurred to me
That only some of history
Is scrawled down.
There are often three
Versions of the book -
Three bibles at a time.
The written, the Oral, and the Mental.
One is the invisible
Sacred word of the head.
I fumble with your words like a zipper.
This is not the book of beginnings
I remember walking with you in.
How different, these words than your mouth.
How different, these temples of the heart.

WORDS SO HARD TO SAY TO A FRIEND GROWING OLDER

I.

You have slept here for days.
 This is the house
 I've only seen pictures of.
 The pieces of my picture are placed
 Inside wet boxes of memory.
 I can't wrap my teeth and mind
 Around the past's slant-light.
 I cannot stop holding the hand
 Of your son in my mind.
 There is a bed placed in the house
 Where a new piece of flesh sleeps.
 Toys and video tape all around.
 You say he has gone to grandma's.
 You are over in another room,
 And can't see where else he is.
 He is in a place you have looked for.
 He is in a place called up from your body.
 In the place high school forgot to show you.
 A place where we first saw the salt of stars.
 You cannot hear these words from here,
 But soon no one will need to say them.
 Some pieces of us have been whispered away,
 Other pieces wait to be born, out of sight.
 One thing that you will for sure remember
 Is that you have to find that hiding place
 Before you are able to look for its road.

II.

I can remember the road and the rain with you.
 Even then, you were searching for that song.
 You never knew it would come later from air.
 Even then, you would not have known
 All the colors your house would be painted in.
 How some liquids are able to change everything.
 How all the dry Octobers can take away.
 How all these old houses are able to settle.
 If you could have seen him coming then

You would have turned the road around with us.
I know and was there in the passenger seat.

III.

I wonder what our answer will be when
Our children ask if we remember history.
The way a tongue feels at seventeen.
The way the road felt for the first time.
Not the way wars were. The way it was.
Will we be priests in some father ceremony
Chanting to phantoms to come and speak?
Can we call them back from dim basement light?
Will they talk of all those fields in the nights of home
And of all the eyes of all the things that saw us
But that we never really saw ourselves?
We might see ourselves coming out of graves
That we never knew we were buried in.
Then, you will search out the place where you were.
There, you will find where all our sons hide away.
Finally, on those holy hills where hearts grow eyes,
The road and our sons will take us by our hands.

INDIAN BURIAL MOUND II

What struck me is the way
That trees grow from your chest.
How hard to have planted that.
This is the ridge in between.
High up, with two worlds
On either side, split in two.
The left and the right.
What is above and below.
What is seen and unseen.
Once, my father wished to cut
The many seasons you'd grown,
Haul off all of the branches,
And then dig down in your ribs
To try and take what you
Had already taken with you.
I climbed the tree in protest, and
Rose up into the hard arms of your heart.
There was no reason I could see
For my father to unbury my father.

RUINS

We are both born in ancient ruins.
The two songs of our blood
Are as long and as smooth
As eagle's and horse's tongues.
At home, I look out on the corpses
Of my own. The hills of tires
And the ghosts of diesels
Litter the body of a country.
They wandered the millions of miles
That can separate the breath.
Here, I can sing an old song
And think of the myths
Our children will know.
Teotihuacan in their eyes.
Burning America on their lips.
I wonder if they will find their father
In the bone yards of a mind,
In the bone yards of a history.

BEFORE IT'S TIME, I THINK OF WHEN YOU'LL FLY AWAY FROM ME

In the dark, I hear
Yawning in other words.
I do not want out of this hot sleep
Under and in this cold room.
The wings you will take are invisible.
Soon, you must away in the dark.
Still, know that you have shown me
The hidden pottery
That holds the secret of flight.
The lines my fingers will remember
Will map the air.
I will go the same as you.
I will meet you on the tops
Of the broken pyramids.
There, bring to me the story
Of what our two tongues have made.
I will be there the same as you.
First, I'll trace your ascent
So that I'll know how.
I will watch you wing away
To touch the last star
Of a hot and southern country.

AFTER READING THE DAILY TORAH PORTION, THEN YEHUDA AMICHAI,
I WALK INTO DUSK TO PRAY

I.

There is not much dust here, but no matter.
I will put my hands to my heart and sift through my own.
I will lift up my eyes and turn them East, towards home.
The old rocks and the radio say a storm is coming.
Over and over, year after year,
Voices from stone and invisible air.
What can I do now but know
It has been far too long since I considered
Your fingers, the stars?
What can I do now but throw
Open all of my windows
And place all my cups outside
To be filled with wind and rain?

II.

I have seen all of time and its shadow
Darken one spot on the map.
I am not there, but my heart is there.
I have not forgotten the table prepared
Between the unseen currents of rain.
Through air and space, the sound
Of slaughtered lambs comes in evening news.
I sit in the coastlands
Waiting for clouds to explode.
I see a city wrapped tight
In its wedding death shroud.
I can almost see a city
Wearing a dress unseen and in your hand.
Things now are only temporary death drives.
Selah. Amain. So be it.
The wedding is both the beginning
And the end of some things.

III.

The city's gold remains unseen.
It will be appraised only

In the pawn shops of eternity.
When the dress and ring come,
Then so does the unseen iron.
The two in one paw,
The other in the other.
It has been said
That this city could explode
On the wings of a single scream.
Right now, the streets are filling their lungs.
The air there is a sucking in of sorts.
I can even feel that from here.
Even so, let that come as well.

IV.

Where I stand now, it is very cold.
But the coming of your fire
Sounds like the future on CNN.
My feet will wait for that.
They will flame out, then cool
In the middle of the heaven
You have shown me.
You will stain the cool lake of my blood.
What can I do now but ask for that?
That is all. To stand stained at dinner's table,
To turn tuned ears towards the scream,
To stand before the storm
And the honest-to-God lion
And his dark jungle eye.
to hear for real the radio
And the invitation coming in with rain.
To be called up into a landscape
Whose arms have waited so long to meet me.

FOLLOWING YOU SOUTH

A Texas night seems dark and dry without end,
The only water received is dew the dust pulls from sky,
A thin drop blanket covering the coyotes and spiders;
Not the rain that we knew that bound and soaked sidewalks.
Caught us on film frozen in the water.

Then, through my hands on wet skin I felt you change.
A strange awkwardness for someone to see
I suppose, up and out there, maybe the maker of thunder.
Still, I smell lightning seeing blue and remember.
Caught us on film frozen in the water.

Now, you burn a line across the map of my mind where rain
Cannot follow. Cannot pass into the house
Of the scorpion and the wolf who ache for water.
I know that you will dance in the dust and the dark
Where no one sees, praising the sidewinder for his acceptance.

CHEROKEE GHOST CHANTS FROM A GRAVE
I VISITED YEARS EARLIER

What becomes known is
That blood is its own father.
We were wrong to think that After
Is somewhere up there and away.
We are known only by our words
And the knives we carried with us.
What becomes shadow doesn't matter;
What becomes shadow is without effort.
What has been slain in the field stays there.
What if we are able to find a way through
And travel in the sheets of the world's storms?
All the good that does is shadow
If there is no one to see in between
Only two of the scattered showers.

AT THE BASE OF THE PYRAMID OF THE SUN

A ragged merchant had slipped in my hands
A bottle in the likeness of Quetzalcoatl,
His hawked face plumed with so many prayers.
I paid twice the price that it was worth.
How fast my Roman hand had moved out
To exchange handfuls of coins for a God.
Holding it, I looked hard at the sharp mouth
Fitted tight around a black onyx.
All the answers had gotten blocked here.
I wanted to dig my fingers in and hear
In Idol-voice answers to pleas long buried.
I could hear all these half-truths and construct.
This is how a memory is really made.
The merchant, making a quick getaway,
Ran down the Avenue of the Dead, kicking dust.
I ran at him to catch up and opened my lips
Offering my words like prayers unanswered.

GETTING LUNCH IN A SOUTHERN COUNTRY

The mouth of the little shop
Opens up and talks.
Now there is no question
I am not home.
You hear things bleeding here,
This meat on hooks.
To touch meat, step over bodies -
I eat fresh tonight.

TALK INSIDE OF A TOBACCO BARN

How all things hang from poles here.
Men by their hands, men by their dreams,
Sweating and hovering underneath
Rusted truck beds piled high with the day's work.
All words here hang on the pole of the tongue.
Holding on with their calloused syllables.
Words come hard from the ground and lips,
Both like two mouths hard to hear and speaking little.
Minds are at work at the top of the barn, working
In the nights of winter, working on letting go.
Only the shadow of these thoughts will echo
Against the stripping rooms in November.

INDIAN MAN CONTEMPLATES THE RAIN SEASON
ON THE RESERVATION

There is a way the world interprets,
And it is the long green of things.
It rains that constantly in Cherokee.
To remember to talk, all of us
Learned to paint our faces with bones.
Little boys come, not understanding this color.
They hold out wet hands to give wet dollars,
Their eyes always hungry for a dance,
But one not too far from their father's car.
When the real dance starts, they will disappear.
There is a place where their blood used to be.
A place where the growl is not far from the throat.
This is a place where skin is never a stopping point.
This is where we find and talk to our real fathers.
I know what the real death is, and that
Comes when all the boys will ever ask for are pictures.

WALKING FROM THE PLASTIC

This is the place where we must pass from memory.
 What has been found is the skin we must slide into.
 The head is no longer enough -
 The story must come out of the mouth.
 There have been thousands of hearts
 Beating inside of the one head.
 The sun wants now to spend its seed
 Inside of the one head.
 All the fields are freshly plowed,
 All streets are opening sunned arms,
 Children are lighting bottle rockets now
 Inside of the one head.
 They are cramped inside the single skull.
 They all have stories for a campfire.
 The sky now is the only thing.
 The real air now is the only thing.
 All of these lungs refuse to fit
 Inside of the one head.
 They must be moved away and out of
 The great hall of caged bone
 And learn to pass from the North.
 They must learn to resettle a land
 Not scrawled on or marked on.
 To be able to bury all their toes
 In the hot sand of many myths.
 They must learn to touch
 With everybody else's fingers.
 It is here, ancient and holy place,
 That they can find the skin of the sun.
 There is milk and honey,
 Blood and fire, a great purple
 Unknowable there over the mountains.
 Here is the home we all must come to know.
 This is the place where we must pass from memory.